

# A HISTORY

*of the*



menomonie  
**MARKET**

FOOD CO-OP

**1973 TO 2015**

# **The Autobiography** *OF THE* **Menomonie Market Food Cooperative**

Compiled by Patrick Pesek-Herriges from:  
timelines by Rick Sitzman and Warren Lang;  
stories collected by Charis Collins;  
interviews and emails with owners;  
review of MMFC archives.

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A small, thoughtful group of Menomonie residents started a food buying club and then a church choir loft-sized food store in 1973. Just over four decades later, the cooperative they launched has opened its newly-built 13,000 sq. ft. Menomonie Market Food Co-op.

This is the co-op's autobiography, written by the owners of Menomonie Market Food Cooperative and by MMFC's remarkable staff. It's unfinished because we continue to change and grow. MMFC was born when mimeograph machines and land lines were how we communicated, and we continue to thrive in the age of emails, websites, blogs and cyber publication. This publication can be found online.

We invite you, our owners and community members, to fill in the blanks with pictures, stories, names, newspaper clippings. You can find instructions for submission on our website at [www.mmfc.coop](http://www.mmfc.coop).

**Menomonie Market Food Co-op will be central  
to a thriving healthy community.**

Because of us customers have local access to healthy choices  
for their physical, social, and environmental needs; the local food  
system is strengthened; the cooperative model is supported;  
our owners have a vital sense of ownership and belonging; and  
employees enjoy sustainable, equitable,  
and dignified employment.

# Prologue

## Patrick Pesek-Herriges, Board member

When Jan and I moved from rural Barron County to Menomonie, we joined MMFC. It was a “no-brainer.” We had learned the value of good quality food, and we shopped at the co-op when we could get to Menomonie. Also, a local community-owned market made better economic sense than chain grocers. Better food; better economics. We joined because our values led us there.

We knew that people we knew had launched MMFC 34 years before we joined. We didn’t know that many other friends and people we came to know had invested their time and money to keep the co-op alive during troubled times. I didn’t know that Studebaker was not only the make of the first automobile I owned (1947 Starlight Coupe) but also the surname of Rose—one of those heroic people who nurtured our co-op. Nor did I understand the full significance of the cooperative movement and its alternative economics.

When I accepted a friend’s suggestion to run for board membership—and was elected—I soon learned that co-ops were the invention of an oppressed economic group, notably in England during times chronicled by the novels of Charles Dickens. I learned that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some very bright people had invented and refined a new system of organizational governance, specifically honed to the needs of co-ops—a system enabling an “association” of owners to delegate and support the

professional operation of their co-op “enterprise.” And, as part of the self-education and visioning process of our board, I got involved in analysis and definition of our “Ends” statement. That, in turn, opened doors to learning about alternative economics—*generative* economics, as opposed to the economics of *extraction* and *exploitation*.

Now, after these experiences, I see co-operatives as more than good grocery stores. Our work in cooperation is part of a community-building alternative to corporate and chain business models encamped in and weakening the economies of our cities and towns.

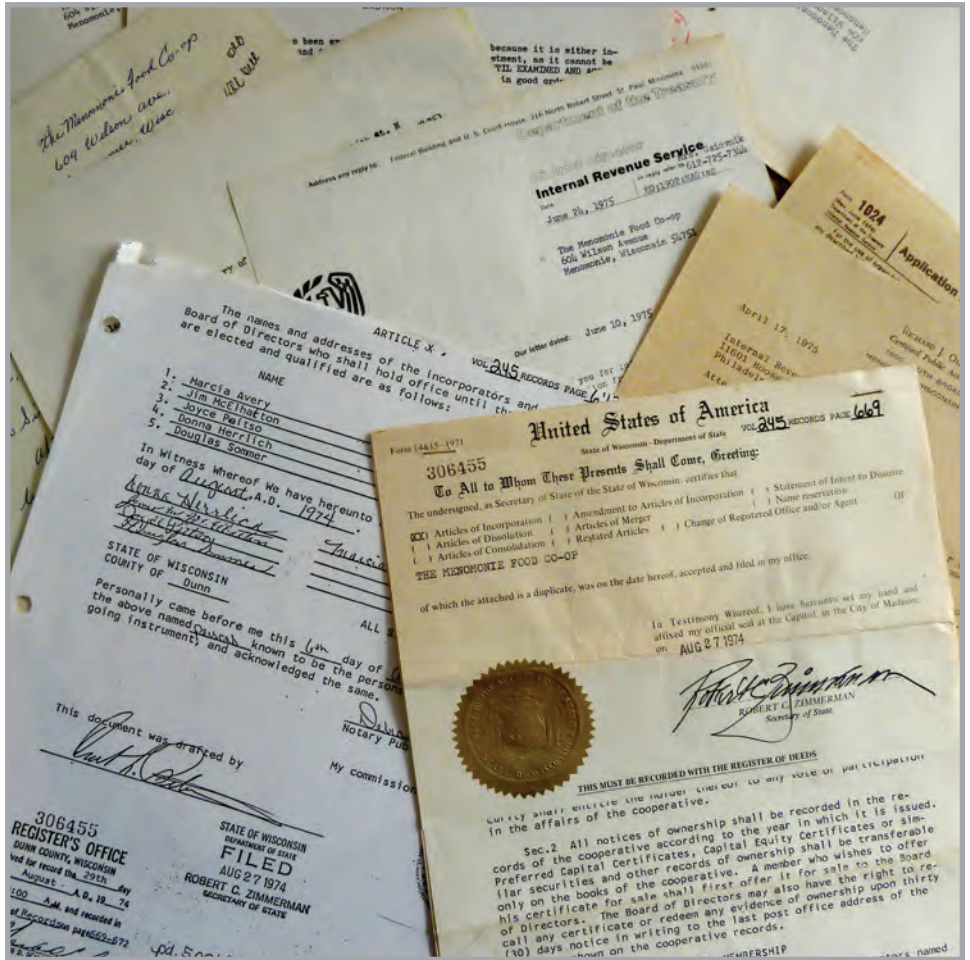
We are at a successful, happy moment in the history of Menomonie Market Food Co-op. Ownership is growing; the store is flourishing. I feel hugely rewarded by time spent looking into this history, of co-ops in general and of MMFC in particular. I feel grateful for the creative work of the MMFC founders, for the dedicated owners who helped it survive and grow, and for the amazing work of our General Manager and her operations team.

The MMFC story is about community members achieving their vision by working together.



*Patrick has served on the MMFC board since 2011, and was president from 2012 to 2014.*





SOME OF THE PAPERWORK it took to start the co-op in 1974, an indication of the hours of work and organization required for the start-up. The Board of Directors listed on the original articles of incorporation were Marcia Avery, Jim McElhatten, Joyce Peitso, Donna Herrlich and Douglas Sommer.

# the Beginning 1973

The seed of Menomonie Market Food Cooperative was a buying club, and was planted in 1973 by Marion Lang, Jean Biggs, Brigitte and Doug Sommer and others. It quickly sprouted and grew. Its members decided to open a physical location with an inventory, and to become a cooperative. The first “store” opened in the Sommer’s residence on 18<sup>th</sup> Ave., about a half-mile south of the new 814 Main store. When they discovered that operating a business in this location was illegal, they quickly moved to the choir loft of the Methodist Church on 7<sup>th</sup> and Wilson, which is now the offices of Cedar Corp.

The group’s next step was to incorporate as the Menomonie Food Co-op (MFC) in August, 1974. The incorporating board included Marcia Avery, Tim McElhatton, Joyce Peitso, Donna Herrlich, and Douglas Sommer. Jean and Marion served as co-managers. They and other members made “runs” for merchandise, including honey, apples and Eau Galle cheese.

MFC was part of the “new wave” or “second wave” of U.S. cooperatives, nurtured by the counter-culture of the 1960s.

Across the river in Minnesota, conflicts over ideals and practices generated the Twin Cities’ “co-op wars” of 1975-76. *The Co-op Organization (CO)*, a Marxist-Leninist faction of the Cities’ co-op movement, forcibly took over the People’s Warehouse, which was the source of most of the Menomonie Food Co-op’s inventory.

In what has been called a “contentious meeting” over this issue, MFC voted not to support the CO. Twin Cities co-ops that opposed the CO opened DANCe (Distributing Alliance of the Northcountry Cooperatives) warehouse, which the Menomonie Food Co-op supported. The CO took over several small co-ops in the Twin Cities, but were boycotted and eventually failed.



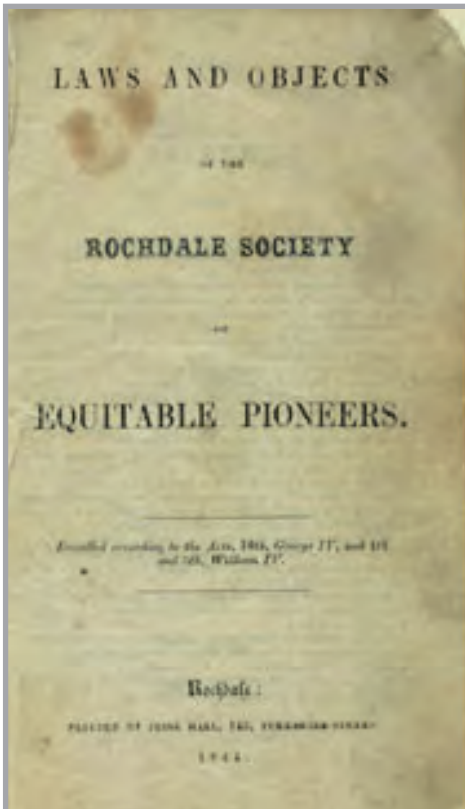
TOAD LANE END, the first cooperative food store, opened in 1844 by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. Their founding principles inspired the international cooperative movement. The original building is now a museum.

# Before the Beginning

The modern cooperative movement came to life in England through the mutual assistance efforts of *The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers* and their development of the “Rochdale Principles” in 1844. This remarkable document was edited and adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance

(ICA) in 1937, and later became the Seven Principles of Cooperation.

The Toad Lane Store, in Rochdale, UK opened on December 21, 1844, stocked with a small supply of butter, sugar, flour, oatmeal, and a few candles. It still stands today, a brick and mortar icon of community self-help and mutual ownership. To put it in historical and cultural context, the Rochdale store opened one year after the publication of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.



The original Rochdale principles were:

- Open Membership *to anyone regardless of class status or gender. This was unheard of at this time in England, when only 1 in 7 men could vote, and women were excluded from voting.*
- Democratic Control
- Dividend on Purchase
- Limited Interest on Capital
- Political and Religious Neutrality
- Cash Trading
- Promotion of Education





THE LEGENDARY SILVER STORE was a small, narrow space without air-conditioning, often staffed by volunteers. It was affectionately referred to as “the Bucket Store.”



# many Locations many hands

## **The Silver Store**

The legendary Silver Store, north of the Marion building on South Broadway (it's now a city parking lot), became the downtown home of MFC's store in 1979. Owned by Edith Allen, it housed two storefronts. Silversmith Robert Geide was the other tenant when the co-op moved in. Later on, it was occupied by the West CAP used goods service.

Rick Sitzman was store manager during the move from "the balcony" to the Silver Store. When he left in 1980, Barb Arntzen and Kathy Colvin became co-managers. They worked to stay ahead of the mice and keep things clean for the customers. By all accounts, it wasn't easy. The store was a long, narrow space, without air-conditioning. One notable, inventive part of its furnishings was a refrigerator on its side. (The door opened upward, one assumes.)

These were the days of low-pay/quasi-volunteer co-op jobs. Barb soon left to work at Head Start, and Kathy stayed on, sometimes closing the store to manage transportation logistics. (Sign on the door: "Gone to pick up children; back at 3.") Naomi

Colvin, Jim Colvin, Patrick Moore, and Tim & Nita Fitzgerald were in the succession of managers at the Silver Building. Board and other members volunteered extensively during this residency.

By 1985, sales of \$46,920 generated \$886.71 in profits. Assets were \$4,638, liabilities were \$4,839, much of it debt to members (notably, Rose Studebaker at \$4,510) and money owed to DANCe and other vendors. Despite these rocky finances, MFC continued to grow and the limited floor space soon became a major problem.

## **1707 Stout St.**

In 1987, a Planning Committee led by Rose Studebaker called for "a new image, a new logo, and a new location." The committee proposed a capital development plan, including instituting a one-time \$100 membership investment.

A site-identification process was developed, and numerous buildings were evaluated against projected growth in sales and costs. It's not clear who drafted a new logo, but when it got a bad review from a



designer, Rose moved to invite that same designer to the next board meeting.

At the July 1988 meeting, Rose and the committee recommended 1707 Stout St. behind Super America and Hattie Maxwell's, owned by Bernie Pittman. In September, on a motion by Debbie Green and Chris Leubner, the board voted to move the store to that building, and "Menomonie Market" was suggested as a new name. Customer purchases, good manage-

ment and a \$100,000 infusion of capital from the North Country Cooperative Development Fund financed the move to the north side.

Tim and Nita Fitzgerald continued as managers until 1991, and were followed by co-coordinators Jackie Bionda and Paula Betz. In May of 1991, the seven-member board included: Tim Fitzgerald, Rae Ann Hayden, Chris Leubner, Joe Plouff, Marjorie Thompson, Anita Wiese, and Rose Studebaker.

MFC's autobiographers often mention Rose Studebaker, whose unwavering support began in the balcony days and continues to the present. Rose learned of the co-op in the late 70s, when her co-worker at the UW-Stout library, Sally Bowker, brought unsalted cashews to lunch breaks. That taste treat was Rose's first attraction to the co-op. She soon became a volunteer, a board member, then board secretary. Her presence and effort are documented in the archives: her format for reports; the many reports she completed; the facility searches she led and documented; her minutes of meetings; her generous financial investment. In a conversation at The Oaks, where Rose now lives, she fondly remembered numerous meetings at her home on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, near the former Cottington School (now the Senior Center). Rose spoke eloquently of her belief in the cooperative model and her respect for the many volunteers who built and grew the co-op.



# MENOMONIE MARKET

SPRING 1991 NEWSLETTER



## Salt Or Not?



Salt. What's all this talk about lately?

Our neighbors down the road, the guy at work and our Aunt Milie have been warned by their doctors to cut it out of their diets. That doesn't mean it's bad for everyone does it? After all, it's in most of the foods and seasoning at the grocery store, and is readily available all by itself.

How many of us promised ourselves we'd check into this salt thing someday? How many of us decided we'd give those salt-free corn chips or herb seasoning a try, someday? How many of us have our doubts anyway, about all those "health-rules" that try to tell us that we shouldn't use salt? And how many of us are secretly scared to resist that wonderful salt shaker as we sit down to the table with our over-easy eggs, our fried potatoes and our steaming ear of corn?

The news about salt's effects on us has been publicized a lot lately. In *The Health Seeker's Yearbook*, published last year, Victoria Bidwell states, "...Hygienic practitioners make a blanket statement that salt-eating is implicated in every disease known to man...because it is toxic and leads to enervation, toxemia, irritation, inflammation, ulceration and irreversible degeneration."

But what does that mean? In her book, Bidwell explains how the body reacts to salt. She suggests sprinkling salt on an open wound to understand how the body reacts to salt we've eaten. All we've heard is that salt retains water weight in our bodies. Bidwell says, "To be exact, understand that salt does not retain."

The water: actually, the body adds upon salt to dilute bodily fluids so that the salt occurs in less damaging, less irritating, less caustic concentrations." Thus, we carry extra weight around in the form of water when we regularly eat salt. For many of us, that "swelling" is a real problem. It can slow circulation down. It can cause all of our organs to be overtaxed, while our bodies constantly strive to protect themselves and expel the salt.

Cutting back on salt and even eliminating it makes sense. We have that option and that control. And we don't have to change our diet all tonight. There are many books offering suggestions on cutting back. We have many in the store, along with free pamphlets on low salt/low fat diets. Even one improvement a month is progress.

As you do cut back on salt, you may find you are craving it fiercely. That's a good sign. According to Bidwell, that is a withdrawal symptom. That's sure proof you are breaking the "salt habit."

## FROM THE MANAGEMENT

June sun has flown since our last newsletter. We're still here, strong as ever.

We've seen many of you a lot lately. That means we sell more faster, which means we have even fresher produce, dried fruits, spices, flours, coffee and oats. By your sales we know we're needed here in this community, which personally encourages me to work that much harder to keep the store clean, stocked and a pleasurable place to shop.

Not only have we tried to offer you a higher quality product at lower or comparable prices, we've offered you products that are grown organically, are recycled or recyclable, are low on packaging that would eventually wind up in our own backyard, and are truly healthier for us, the earth and for those who are becoming adults around us. I commend you for caring enough to seek out the best products you can find.

Your dollars are going to support those farmers who are taking a big risk and growing organically because they care about our health. Your dollars are going to companies that refrain from testing their fresh products on small animals. Your dollars are going to companies that use recyclable packaging, for instance, shredded newspaper instead of styrofoam peanuts. And your dollars are going to companies that stay abreast with medical research and make delicious foods without things that hurt us, like excess salt, highly processed sugars and oils, cholesterol, preservatives and colorings.

When you buy products from companies like these, who are true pioneers, you let them know you are grateful for their efforts to give us the highest quality, with the least amount of harm to our planet.

Now, doesn't your environmentally responsible support allow you to sleep better at night?

On your next trip here, you might not see the by now familiar face of Paula. She is leaving us soon [redacted] as a real estate agent. She certainly has made some great contributions to our store and we are very grateful and wish her the best. She asked us to say thanks to all of you for your kindness, support and company during her time here.

I hope you will go on to read more about what's happening in our store. We're pumped up as spring approaches. As always, we'd like to hear your comments and suggestions. Come on in and talk to us, or feel free to write a note to put in our suggestion box. We're not just a regular store here! We've got some of the highest quality products around, some of the lowest prices, we're socially and environmentally responsible, and we're friendly besides. We'll see you again!

Jackie

BEFORE DIGITAL, we used typewriters and copy machines. This newsletter is from 1991, and is one of the few mementos we have of the 1707 Stout St. location (behind what is now Perkins).

# building **Cooperation** through adversity

## **A Crisis Transformed**

The move to a new location brought new challenges. After Jackie and Paula's service, there was a sequence of short-term managers, co-managers and pro-tem coordinators, including Matthew Baker, Ken Bessac, Cathleen McCoy, Jan Erdman and Sara Nagler.

At the June 1991 meeting, the Treasurer's Report showed alarming cash flow problems and the lowest month of sales for the year. A detailed action plan was developed, including flexible payment to Blooming Prairie warehouse, a sandwich board for additional marketing, and suspending membership fees. Rose Studebaker waived payments on her loan for the next three months, and additional member loans were solicited. A loan from Northwest Cooperative Development Fund was requested, and Karla Miller of NCDF was enlisted to assist in financial planning. Despite all that, October and November saw serious delays in rent and loan payments.

During 1992, the year of crisis, the Board appointed Cathleen McCoy, Barb Button, Jackie Bionda and Karen Sheppard to a management oversight team. Tim Fitzgerald vol-

unteered support to that committee. At the April 12, 1992 membership meeting, there was debate over an offer to purchase the store. On a motion by Paul Helgeson/Gabriel Romo membership unanimously decided to "keep the store open with the trial management team." At this time, a "Wholesale Club" provided bulk-purchase discounts to club members. A suggestion to raise charges to club members to 10 percent above cost was referred to the board, which approved it on April 20. A Recapitalization Plan developed by Joe Plouff included a 5% discount incentive for members to purchase \$100 "cash investment shares."

New to Menomonie and to the co-op in 1989, Jan and Jim Erdman became active volunteers and helpers with the relocation. In 1992, Jan was one of several part-time workers at the co-op. She describes a time of dramatic changes imposed by management, including dismissal of bookkeeper Jane Hoyt.

One day, Jan discovered a stack of unopened mail on the manager's desk. She called board president Skip Ford. Together, they opened the mail

and discovered a telephone disconnection notice for the next day, and numerous unpaid bills. There were clear cash flow deficits.

Emergency meetings of the board and then the membership were convened, and a decision was made to close the co-op. Jan was asked to sell the inventory, notify creditors, and close the books.

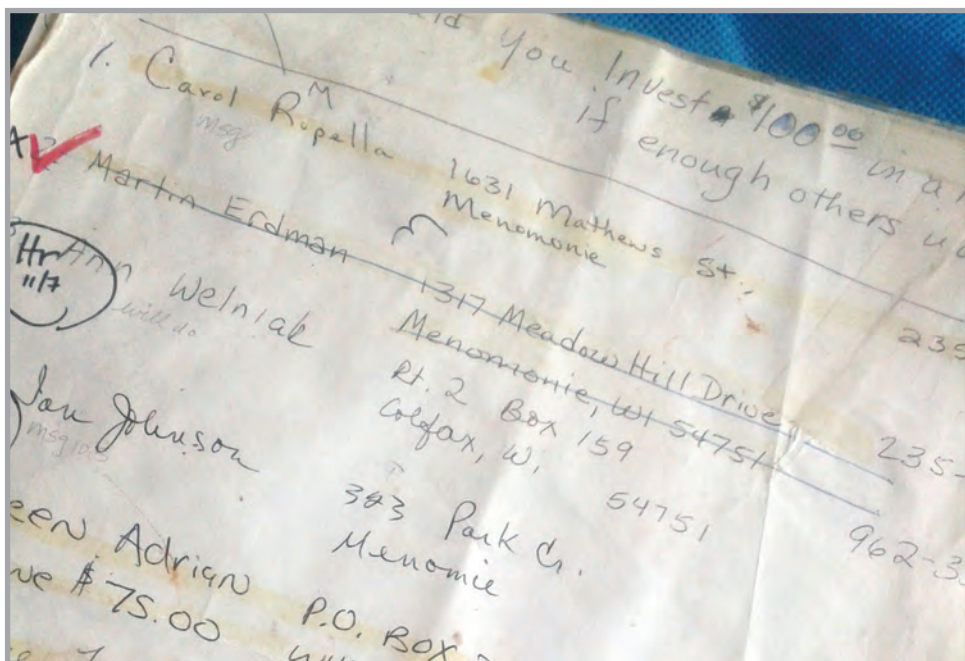
### Co-op Heroes Save the Store

Jan and assistant Sara Nagler went to work on this decision the next day. Immediately, they were faced with an eviction notice in that very day's mail—and then with the stunned disbelief of members who had come to buy food. People asked what could be done to save the co-op.

Planning-to-dissolve turned quickly into planning-to-survive.

"We came up with this plan that if we could raise \$5000 (50 new memberships), negotiate with the creditors, and find a new building to rent there might be a chance; we were young and optimistic." A pledge sheet for new memberships was placed on the check-out counter.

"Within days, we had 48 signatures! At that point people really kicked into high gear! Cathleen McCoy made very persuasive calls to creditors and asked for extensions of credit, arguing that if we were able to stay in business we would eventually be able to pay off what we owed them. If we went out of business they would lose all that we owed them for sure! She was amazing!" Jan remembered.



THE PLEDGE SHEET with the names of the 48 people whose financial investment in 1992 kept the co-op open.

# **moving Forward**

## **1994-2014**

### **North Broadway**

The search for a new storefront led to the “Block Building,” so-called for its construction, at 1309 N. Broadway (now the Branches Church). Skip Ford, Jan and Cathleen met with owner Al Curry and negotiated a manageable rent, based on a red-line payment due date on the first of each month. Kurt Buetow, Jody Slocum, Kathy Ruggles and others used a horse trailer to move merchandise and equipment. Volunteers helped unload and set up the new store.

Every building not designed as a grocery has its operational problems. The doorway of the Block Building was too narrow to accommodate larger produce coolers. A new sink had to be installed—Jim Erdman and Louis Stone did the plumbing. City ordinances prohibited a billboard—only a movable sandwich board was allowed. Also, this was the summer of reconstruction on North Broadway. The street was closed, and customers could only access the store by the road from what was then Thunderbird Mall. “And still they came in to shop! We have an absolutely amazing membership; I cannot begin to

name all the people who came to shop and volunteer,” recalled Jan Erdman. Some of the active members remembered from this time are Gloria Pieters, Shirley Tilseth, Denny Lenz, Lavonne Solem, Gineen Adrian, Erica Eddy, Luann Snyder, Samantha Hanson, and Laura Bucholtz. Charles Capaldi donated a computer, and record-keeping went digital! Co-managers during this time included Sandy Gorden and Michelle Tadian. Erica Eddy and Jan Erdman were co-managers from 1996–1999, followed by Monica Walter and Jackie Williams. Gretchen Metzler was a primary employee.

By January, 1997, the board was considering options for re-location (a space in L-Mart was mentioned). Checking into costs of land or buildings and possible loans was on the “to-do” list.

In September, 1998, a letter to members from Erica and Jan announced the first-ever patronage dividend to members. In October, Karla Miller, manager of West CAP’s Business Development Program, asked to include Menomonie Market as a possible tenant in a downtown commercial





## NORTH BROADWAY

above left: Jan Erdman, co-manager of Menomonie Market at the time, Nancy Curry of Creative Ideas and Cathleen McCoy, who was board president, seal the deal for taking over the north Broadway store. Photo by Pat Eggert, courtesy of *Dunn County News*.

right top to bottom: a meeting inside the Broadway location; the store was between a travel agent and the Dairy Queen on north Broadway; an early logo from the Stout Street store; this logo was designed by Brianna Capra, and showcased the store's new name.



kitchen project as part of a Community Based Economic Development grant. The Board authorized participation in the plan, and focused on financial readiness. By late 1999, MM had paid its debts, including member loans and unpaid rent at the Brown Building, and had put \$15,000 into savings.

### **A Move Downtown and Big Changes**

Jan Erdman was ready to turn over the reins, and they were placed in the capable hands of Terri Golen, who came to MM with extensive experience at the Stillwater and Mississippi Market Co-ops.

Terri was manager from 2001 until the 30th anniversary in 2003. She remembers Gail Tourville and then Jackie Williams as bookkeepers, and the work of Erica Eddy. She remembers Karla Miller helping the board to have shorter, more efficient meetings, and Karla's work in developing the lease for MM at the Crossroads Center, at 521 Second St. Terri acted as general contractor for the move from North Broadway back to the downtown—a process she says she enjoyed, and one that fully engaged her talent and resourcefulness. She credits Steve Horner (Board President) and Dan Fedderly (Board Treasurer) for significant advice and support in making the move. And she thanks members. Members loaned \$125,000 to enable this relocation!

Steve Horner offered some reflections on this time, and on Terri's work. "Terri Golen did not come to

this job with experience in planning, designing and building stores, but she researched and learned what was needed...and made sure the co-op employees and board also learned what was needed. When the move was complete, there was a huge surge in membership and sales. Terri managed this growth through the first years in the new store. Dan Fedderly was the Treasurer, but he played a far larger role than the title would presume. Dan was the steady rock in board meetings, helping to keep the board and the co-op grounded in financial reality..."

Steve Horner described the transition as "...the slow process of the evolving co-op mindset. During the decision process of moving the store to its current location, there was a two-year process of surveying membership as to what they wanted from the co-op. There were strong voices for modernizing and expanding the store, and strong voices to remain the small organic organization the co-op had become. These voices slowly moved together to build the store we shop in today."

From her work in Twin Cities metro co-ops, Terri brought experience with customer service training and Policy Governance (PG). This led her to advocate for both at Menomonie Market. She and board member Cari Witcher were strong proponents of the PG system. The concept was controversial, as has been typical in the experience of other co-ops. When Terri stepped down, the PG issue had not been resolved.



## SECOND STREET GRAND OPENING

top, left to right: Terri with the Everyone Welcome sign; ribbon cutting; local musicians added a festive feel to the day

middle, left to right: Monica and the new produce cooler; Second Street 2003; inside the co-op on opening day

bottom, left to right: Board members Naomi Colvin, Mame Gale, Jackie Bionda and Charles Capaldi; pumpkin pie and Eat My Fish; new colorful logo

## Expansion

When Crystal Halvorson joined MM as General Manager in 2004, she brought with her a three-career background in education, medical services and restaurant management. She arrived skilled in all phases of business management (personnel, bookkeeping, marketing, customer relations) and brimming over with the cooperative spirit. And before all that experience were Bachelor of Science degrees in Genetics and Bacteriology.

Crystal waded into challenges of residual debt, marginal cash flow and internal divisions around policy and operational philosophy. She saw the need, once again, for expansion and the board agreed. Over the next few years, several key changes enabled structural readiness. MM joined the National Cooperative Grocer's Association, we converted from giving discounts at the register to awarding patronage dividends, and finally migrated to Policy Governance. The logo was changed once again to the lower case "double m," and "food co-op" was once again part of our official title: Menomonie Market Food Co-op.



All of these changes required a collaborative effort with the board of directors and with membership. This was a key transition in MMFC's history, enabling the co-op to clearly divide

responsibilities between the member "association" and the grocery "enterprise." It enabled a professional General Manager to make operational decisions, within a set of Ends and Accountability policies.

With the benefit of archival hindsight, one can see that these transitions were foreshadowed in the board and staff work of the mid-nineties—in manager's reports, board action on managers' recommendations, the formation of board and personnel policies, the development of mission statements and goals. As the store grew, there was necessarily more dependence on management for operations. The board became more concerned with governance and financing.

Those who served on the board during this time can attest to the careful, patient work needed to clarify and define the mutually-supportive roles of board and GM.

Business throughout our life at Second Street was good. The co-op experienced substantial growth in membership, sales, net income, local food sourcing, and community relations. Membership grew from 325 to 1700—more than 500%! Sales increased from \$500K to \$2.5M annually, at a rate-per-square foot of some of the busiest food co-ops in the country. Operational profit, and therefore patronage dividends have been made consistently since 2007.

As Crystal has remarked: "I've been in expansion mode from the first day." On-site expansion was enabled by reshaping the store's footprint:



## SECOND STREET

above left: Expanding sales allowed us to support more local producers—pictured is Mariann Hlm, an Organic Prairie dairy farmer

right top to bottom: the Lunchbox was part of our in-store expansion; deli grab-and-go items were among the product expansion at the Second Street store; the famous Lunchbox logo





taking down the back wall and moving coolers into the former commercial kitchen area to gain retail floor space (2006); installing a new point-of-sale system (2007); moving administrative offices to the Marion Hotel building and converting the break room/meeting room into the highly successful Lunchbox (2009). The search for a new location touched on numerous downtown sites, and centered on what has been known as “the Leever’s property” on Broadway. By Crystal’s report, she negotiated 7 times for possible expansions onto that central and desirable property.

In 2013, West CAP, owner of the building at 521 2nd St. E, accepted an offer to purchase from a third party. Because a first right to match an accepted offer wisely had been included in our lease, MMFC was able to purchase the building at what had become an acceptable, even desirable, price. This purchase factored into expansion planning because it yielded immediate savings in cash flow. New mortgage payments were significantly lower than lease payments, and possible time conflicts or overlaps between lease terms and construction schedules were eliminated.

Twice, in 2010 and again in 2014, MMFC negotiated lease agreements for anchor retail space within the proposed and approved “Gateway” and “Broadstreet” development projects at the Leever’s site. Both times, those projects were withdrawn due to political opposition and/or overreach by the developer. Again in late 2014, MMFC was invited to become a tenant in yet another development proposal for the

property, this time by Commonweal.

At precisely the same time, the Dunn County DHS property at Main and 9th was made available for auction bids. Crystal and the board were faced with a decision: to bid on the DHS property on July 22, 2014, or to enter negotiations on the following day for another prospective lease opportunity at the Leever’s site. Following a thorough and careful analysis of the prospects and input from a focus group of owners and community members, the board authorized Crystal to engage in the bidding for the DHS property. One of the scale-tipping factors in this decision was the benefit of becoming the developer and owner of our own facilities.

Perhaps most significantly, during 2014 members purchased Class C shares and made loans to MMFC totaling more than \$1 million. MMFC is the smallest U.S. co-op ever to raise one million dollars in member support for expansion.

The July 2014 decision opened doors of cooperation and collaboration with both Dunn County and the City of Menomonie. The City collaborated with MMFC to apply for a Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation Community Investment grant, which resulted in \$500,000 for the MMFC construction project, and the about-to-be-built Farmers’ Market and Community Events pavilion adjacent to Wilson Park, a block from the MMFC building.





## 814 MAIN OPENING

top, left to right: Crystal won the auction bid on the site; a hole in the ground; skeleton of the new building—the elevator shaft is visible to the left  
middle, left to right: construction continues; Board of Directors; the classroom at dawn

bottom, left to right: the staff gets excited; ribbon cutting on opening day; Fresh produce on opening day

facing page: the bid card from the DHS site auction, signed by staff and supporters



## Who Are We Now?

As of October 2015, we are more than 1,800 owners of a thriving grocery store, operating in a building we own, providing high quality, healthy food, mainly organic, and locally-sourced to the maximum possibility. We are the builders of a new, modern, sustainable grocery store at the corner of Main and 9th Streets. It has 6,500 sq. ft. of retail space—almost five times larger than the Second Street store. In our new location, we operate a new, expanded deli and lunchroom that serves hot breakfast, lunch and dinner. Our expanded education program makes presentations and holds discussions in a sunlit conference room on the mezzanine floor, near the staff offices. The facility is fully accessible. There's an outdoor seating area for dining al fresco.

We are members of the National Cooperative Grocers. Our GM is active within the network of General Managers. Our board members regularly attend seminars and gatherings hosted by the Consulting Cooperative of Cooperative Development Services, by the Consumer Cooperative Management Association, and by NCG. We are active members of the Menomonie community, especially within food quality and food security networks. As retiring board member Lisa Ludwig put it: "The light is shining brightly on our co-op!" "What it takes," founding board member Doug Sommers said, on the phone from his and Brigitte's retirement home in Florida, "what it takes is good people."

When the 41-year life of this coopera-

tive is condensed to a few pages, the actions of members, managers, board members and staff emerge as the key events: hundreds of meetings, thousands of volunteer hours, smart and disciplined work by managers, the commitment of managers and employees to jobs for which they were at times unpaid, the willingness of consumers to invest financially in their cooperative, and of owners to make loan and share investments, and the hundreds of thousands of purchases by our owners and customers.

## Where Are We Going?

In 2014, the Board of Directors launched a visioning project, which included a clear understanding of our Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats—the classic "SWOT" analysis. This project is loosely modeled on the "Business Is Good" (BIG) strategic planning work of the Wheatfield Co-op in Austin, Texas. Ours is titled BLT, for its "Big Long-Term" vision.

This work includes an effort to further define our Ends. What does it mean to be central to a thriving, healthy community? What are the indicators of a thriving community? A healthy community? And what is the "Big Long-Term Vision" for our cooperative? As of 2015, the board has affirmed MMFC's core capacity as a purchaser and seller of quality food and related products. We intend to strengthen and grow in that capacity. As we work to realize our Ends, we also work to strengthen our community.

# Epilogue

**Crystal Halvorson, General Manager**

Running a small, independent grocery store is really hard work these days; margins are very tight, competition is everywhere, and supporting high quality, local and small family companies is a lot of work both operationally and administratively. Why are we doing this? And it's not just staff working so hard to pull this off—shoppers put up with our odd hours, odd locations, and odd product sets, vendors are willing to deliver small loads, and those serving on the board of directors are volunteering a lot of time toward our success. Why are we so dedicated, all of us?

with their children. Throughout the history of our co-op, we have been working to secure our futures. We want farmland and water that is clean for future crops. We want resources to stay in our communities so there is room to innovate and grow. We want an educated and healthy youth so that there are adults in the future that question the status quo and make positive change. And we believe that food is the answer to all of that, as it provides fuel for our bodies, is a major part of every economy, and can contribute to the destruction or healing of our natural resources.



This is a photo from the Silver Store—here you can see why folks called it the bucket store. Pictured is member Linda Capra, scooping some food while her frilly-pantsed two-year-old Brianna helps. Many of our founders were searching for less adulterated food, food they could trust and share

I hope this in no way sounds judgmental, but over the last 12 years at MMFC, I have learned to see what a child raised the “co-op way” looks like: bright eyed, curious, engaged, polite, verbal, and rosy-cheeked. Watching people make great food and lifestyle choices at MMFC has convinced me that providing a child with real food, and helping them see the connection that their food makes with soil, people, water, and the economy makes for a great kid.

And pictured on the following page is Brianna, all grown up with her son Jasper. Look familiar? Scooping some real food for her little one at Menomonie Market. These pictures are wonderful but not unique—we



have many families that have two and three generations of shoppers. With our expanded store, we are welcoming in new families every day that can start to build this tradition as well.

We should all be proud—the vision for an alternative choice in Menomonie that Marion Lang, Jean Biggs, and Brigitte and Doug Sommers envisioned over forty years ago is still alive. We are still, all these years later, looking ahead to see what kind of future we can secure.

